

Associates for Scriptural Knowledge • P.O. Box 25000, Portland, OR 97298-0990 USA
 © ASK, May 2012 • All rights reserved • Number 5/12

Telephone: 503 292 4352

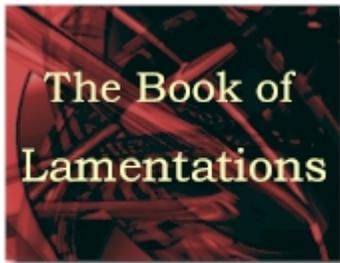
• **Internet:** www.askelm.com •

E-Mail: askoffice@askelm.com

The Book of Lamentations

by David Sielaff, May 2012

Read the accompanying [Newsletter for May 2012](#)



The title of the Book of Lamentations in the Hebrew text is designated by its first word. It is “How” or “Alas,” a Hebrew word of lament giving the meaning, “How did this happen?” When I consider this book and its subject matter I think of the graphic painting by Expressionist artist Edvard Munch called “The Scream” showing a person, seemingly in agony, his eyes crazed, his hands to his face in hopelessness, having experienced some horror, all against a background of red sky.¹ This is the uncomfortable feeling one gets when reading the Book of Lamentations.

The Book of Lamentations is a detailed account of the sufferings of Jerusalem’s people, through the siege and its later conquest, due to God’s punishment for their individual and national sins. Every strata of society was guilty, but particularly the wealthy, the prophets, priests, and rulers. The depravity and horror of the suffering during the siege of Jerusalem clearly comes through the words of the 5 poems of Lamentations. The writer of the book understood: **“Do not both the evil and the good come forth from the mouth of the Supreme?”** (Lamentations 3:38, Concordant Version).

Sequence of events:

- The last good King of Judah, Josiah, is killed at age 39 in a battle at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chronicles 35:20–27).² His death **“made void the covenant of your servant [David]”** (Psalm 89:39). Four more kings (two sons of Josiah, a grandson, and an uncle, also descendants of David), sat on the throne before the Davidic line of kings ended at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

¹ Because the painting is unsettling, I will not reproduce it here. However, that graphic image to me conveys the agony, the horror, and the seeming unending emotional pain without hope. See the Wikipedia article [“The Scream.”](#)

² Josiah reformed the Mosaic cult and put away most all of the pagan practices, objects, and sacrificial sites. He even killed pagan priests in Samaria, the land of the former northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 23:20). The death of Josiah ended all of the reformation activity. Josiah’s successors greatly increased their depravity and disobedience to God’s laws, as Jeremiah makes clear in his prophecies. The people of Judah knew of the warning of 5-fold increasing punishments of Deuteronomy 32:22–26 given by Moses and those of the prophets Amos and Isaiah. See Dr. Martin’s articles, [“Mosaic Prophecies for the End Time”](#) and [“Introduction to Isaiah,”](#) which discuss the 5-fold intensity of punishment for disobedience to God laws by Israel.

- Jeremiah writes Psalm 89 in lament. **“And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women spoke of Josiah in their lamentations, unto this day”** (2 Chronicles 35:25). The phrase **“unto this day”** means in the day of Ezra, the writer of Second Chronicles.
- Jeremiah later writes the Book of Lamentations (but still soon after Josiah’s death), a series of prophecies showing the specific fulfillment of his prophecies compiled in the Book of Jeremiah. Remember that Judah was to be the first to drink from the cup of YHWH’s anger (Jeremiah chapter 25). The Book of Lamentations details the destruction of Jerusalem 22 years before it occurred. Here is the second portion of 2 Chronicles 35:25: **“... and [they] made them an ordinance in Israel; and, behold, they are written in the lamentations.”**
- Finally after the 22 years of warning and calls for repentance from YHWH through His prophet Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar besieges, attacks, and destroys Jerusalem, as told in Jeremiah chapters 39 and 52, 2 Kings chapter 25:1–12, and 2 Chronicles chapter 36.³
- Some 125 years later Ezra places the Book of Lamentations (mentioned in 2 Chronicles 35:25) as the central book of the 5 books of the Megillot, within the third division of the Old Testament called Writings. He ordered that all five chapters or poems of Lamentations were to be read annually every 9th of Ab to memorialize the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.⁴

<u>The Old Testament Books of the Megillot</u>	<u>Festival when Read or Performed</u>
Song of Solomon	Passover
Ruth	Pentecost
Lamentations	Ab 9
Ecclesiastes	Tabernacles
Esther	Purim

- Some 600 years after Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction, Roman legions conquer Jerusalem and burn the Temple — again, on the 9th/10th of Ab.
- The Book of Lamentations also has significance for the future:

“I am convinced that the theme being developed is not one of the past, though that significance is there, but it is a theme for the future. This [Book of] Lamentations and its association with Ab 10 is a prophetic indication of what we are to look for in the years ahead of us. This is an example of Design Prophecy.”

• *Dr. Martin, “[Megillot in Prophecy](#)”*

After the return from exile in Babylon, Ezra the priest reorganized the Temple services. The books of the Megillot were read or performed in the women’s court of the Temple during the various festivals. In that way all children learned the important lessons that they contain about God’s care for the people of Israel, His requirements of obedience, punishment for disobedience, hope for restoration after punishment, and knowledge that God is always watching out for His people wherever they may be.

³ Here is the sequence of events for the destruction of Jerusalem. After a two year siege (2 Kings 25:1–2), Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon came with the bulk of the Babylonian army on the 7th of Ab (2 Kings 25:8). The city, her people weakened by starvation, was attacked and captured on the 9th of Ab (2 Kings 25:3; Jeremiah 39:2 and 52:6). The Temple was burned down on the 10th of Ab (2 Kings 25:9; Jeremiah 52:12–13; and 2 Chronicles 36:19).

⁴ See Dr. Martin’s article [“Megillot in Prophecy,”](#) “Chapter 10, [The Writings Division](#)” and “Appendix 1: [Preliminary Suggestions for the Structure of the Psalms](#)” (from his book [Restoring the Original Bible](#)). These all present evidence regarding the 5-fold structure and how it is used throughout the Bible.

The Structure of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations has a five-fold structure, divided into easily identifiable sections. Each is a complete poem, corresponding to the 5 chapters in modern bibles. Besides being read or performed during the festival on the 9th of Ab, it would not be surprising if Lamentations also was used to teach writing and memorization. The alphabetic or acrostic structure would aid memory and recitation, as well as writing.

Another interesting feature of Lamentations is that there are many shifts of persons, for example from 3rd person to 1st person as the speaker. Dr. David Dorsey notes that these shifts in person indicate sub-units within the acrostic 5-fold structure of each chapter or poem.⁵

Chapter 1

SUBJECT: “The deserted city” — 22 verses, each beginning with a Hebrew letter in alphabetic sequence.

Lamentations 1:1–11 is in the 3rd person feminine singular (55+ instances). In verses 1:12–22 Zion is speaking in the 1st person singular (40 instances). Zion is a symbol for the collective people of Jerusalem.

The poet shows Jerusalem being solitary and empty. God’s dealings with Jerusalem are justified by the poet, while God is implored to avenge Zion. The city sits alone like a widow weeping sorely in her loss — of everything.

Chapter 2

SUBJECT: “God’s Warnings Fulfilled” — 22 verses, each beginning with a Hebrew letter in alphabetic sequence.

Lamentations 2:1–8 is in the 3rd person masculine singular (50 instances) referring to YHWH’s actions in the destruction of Jerusalem. Verses 2:9–12 are in the 3rd person plural (13 occurrences) with the suffering of the people being described in terrible detail. Lamentations 2:13–22 is in the 2nd person feminine singular (30 times). Here the poet is addressing Zion directly. A short prayer (verses 20–22) ends this poem.

The prophet laments the complete desolation of Jerusalem. These miseries are described as being caused by sins of everyone in the nation.

Chapter 3

SUBJECT: “God’s Love Remains” — 66 verses, each 3 verses begin with the same Hebrew letter in alphabetic sequence.

The third poem has two portions; the first tells about the writer’s experiences and the second half gives hope for future salvation from YHWH. Jeremiah is a sufferer along with the people, not presenting himself here as a prophet or teacher. Most importantly, the poet understands that everything in life comes from God:

“For He [YHWH] does not humiliate from His heart or so afflict the sons of humanity. To crush beneath His feet all the prisoners of the earth,

To turn aside right judgment for a master in front of the face of the Supreme,

To overturn a human in his cause, does not YHWH see?

Who is this who speaks and it comes about if YHWH does not determine it?

Do not both the evil and the good come forth from the mouth of the Supreme?”

• *Lamentations 3:33–38, Concordant Version*

Lamentations 3:1–20 is again in the 1st person masculine singular (40 occurrences). In this case the poet (Jeremiah himself) is speaking. At the same time there is interplay with YHWH who speaks with the poet in

⁵ Much of what follows, particularly the analysis about the change of person, comes from Chapter 24, “Lamentations, His Mercies Are New Every Morning,” in David Dorsey’s *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grant Rapids: MI, Baker Books, 1999), pp. 247–250. I highly recommend this book.

the 3rd person masculine singular (almost 30 times), who tells what YHWH has done to him. In verses 3:21–32, which Dorsey considers the central unit of all Lamentations, is in 3rd person masculine singular. Verses 3:33–39 is again in the 1st person with interplay of 3rd person singular references to YHWH. Verses 3:40–66 addresses YHWH in the 2nd person masculine singular, again speaking to YHWH in prayer.

The poet here presents himself as typical of the nation, suffering along with his people. In spite of this, he claims YHWH as his portion and calls upon God for succor and pity. There are elements of hope beyond the suffering. The chastisement will eventually be seen to be for their good; a better day will come for them. The siege was so terrible that unbelievable horrors were committed by otherwise loving people:

“They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger: for these pine away, stricken through for want of the fruits of the field. The hands of the pitiful women have sodden [boiled] their own children: they were their meat in the destruction of the daughter of my people.”

• *Lamentations 4:9–10*

Chapter 4

SUBJECT: “Zion’s Punishment” — 22 verses, each beginning with a Hebrew letter in alphabetic sequence, but with an interesting difference that is not well understood. Two of the beginning Hebrew letters are intentionally changed to be out of sequence.

Lamentations 4:1–10 is predominantly in the 3rd person plural with reference to those surviving from the conquest and sacking of the city of Jerusalem. Verses 4:11–16 most often use 3rd person masculine singular showing God in His anger and wrath against Zion and their leaders, again focusing on the prophets and priests.

Why did God punish the city and people of Jerusalem? The heaping up of sin and increasing disobedience is summed up in one sentence:

“For [the-punishment-of] the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than [the-punishment-of] the sin of Sodom, that was overthrown as in a moment, and no hands stayed on her.”

• *Lamentations 4:6*

I crossed out the above words because those noun phrases do not occur in Hebrew, as you will find in most modern translations. The focus of this passage is not upon the punishment, but it is upon the **“iniquity”** and **“sin”** of God’s people in Jerusalem, which was worse than what took place at Sodom. The phrase **“No hands stayed on her”** simply means that Sodom’s destruction came about without any human agency being used for punishment, unlike Jerusalem’s punishment.

Who were the worst ones doing these evil deeds? Two groups of gross sinners singled out were the prophets and the priests. Both had **“shed the blood of the just”** (Lamentations 4:13–14). This play on words meant that the prophets and priests were murdering people just as if they were slaughtering animals.

Verses 4:17–22 uses 1st person plural as the poet speaks for the nation as a whole. Note that Edom receives the prophet’s attention for punishment that has not occurred in history. It will occur in the future:

“Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, that dwell in the land of Uz; the cup also shall pass through unto you⁶: you shall be drunken, and shall make yourself naked. The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished,

O daughter of Zion; he [YHWH] will no more carry you away into captivity: he will visit your iniquity, O daughter of Edom; he will discover your sins.”

• *Lamentations 4:21–22*

⁶ This likely is Jeremiah’s reference to the cup of God’s anger, given here to Judah and Jerusalem, and later to be given to all the nations of the world. See Dr. Martin’s article [“The Most Significant Gentile Nation in the Bible”](#) which discusses Edom and her punishments, and even punishments future to our present day.

Chapter 5

SUBJECT: “A Plea for Mercy” — 22 verses, but the first letters of each verse are **NOT** in Hebraic alphabetical order, not an acrostic.

This fifth and last poem is presented in the first person plural (some 40 times).

It is widely recognized as a prayer. Jeremiah is representing his people (like Daniel does later in Daniel 9:20) as he prays for God to look again upon the plight of His people. He confesses his sin and implores deliverance primarily for his people. He pleads for a future reversal from evil to good, when God will turn their hearts to Himself, and help them return to the glorious days of old (5:21).

Conclusion

What is the significance of the changes from first person, to third person, from singular to plural, etc.? First, the acrostic regularity of 4 of the 5 poems or songs shows that they were structured to be performed with various individuals and groups being represented and given the opportunity to “make a statement” about the situation. Points of view are presented from multiple perspectives. Perhaps a tragic “opera” might be one way of relating to a modern day performance structure. Each of the 5 chapters is an individual poem that has complete story arcs and subordinate arcs of plot that give unique presentations.

All human beings are guilty before God, yet all can find favor with God in the future. The horrors endured by the people would have caused what today we call post-traumatic stress syndrome. This would have happened to every survivor, all of whom probably saw relatives, friends, and acquaintances murdered in front of their eyes. Personal violations would have been multiple and enduring. In ancient times killing was usually not done at a distance. It was personal, done face-to-face with the killer at the end of the weapon looking directly at the victim. The emotional trauma of survivors combined with debilitation from starvation and disease from the 2-year siege, it is no wonder that Jerusalem did not strongly resist at the end.

It probably took two or more generations for the surviving Jewish exiles in Babylon to regain emotional stability. Only a minority of Jews (and Israelites) ever returned from Babylon or Assyria. Most stayed and lived as Jews in the land of their captives, even after they were permitted to return to Judea in the time of King Cyrus. Why did not more return to the land God gave them? We cannot know; the reasons are not specified in the Books of Ezra or Nehemiah. In Ezra it says that God caused some to want to return:

“Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of YHWH which is in Jerusalem.”

• **Ezra 1:5**

The Book of Job describes loss and anguish on a personal level. The Book of Lamentations describes horror and anguish of an entire people on a national level. It particularly shows the punishment of the city of Jerusalem. It is important to remember that the five Lamentations were written as a prophecy, set down before the events described. God gave the people decades to repent. They did not do so and they suffered horrific consequences that only God Himself can heal.⁷

All those who suffered and died, those who were traumatized before death, God will heal them in the physical resurrection. They will receive emotional healing and education about God’s love for each of them. To us, they are an example and a warning about the consequences of disobedience to God. They and the rest of the world will learn — for the first time — about God’s love and grace for them through Christ’s sacrifice, resurrection, and righteousness to each individual and nation.

David Sielaff, May 2012

⁷ By comparing and identifying with modern events we can know some of the trauma told in Lamentations. The Holocaust of the Jews in World War II, the Armenian Holocaust in the 1920s, or the hundreds of millions killed by the Soviet Union and China during the 1930s through the 1960s. All these were personal, familial, and national traumas that take multiple generations to work through. It no doubt took a long time for Jewish survivors in Babylon to come to terms with their personal and national trauma.